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How Party Leader Evaluation Affects Party Support

A Study of Campaign Effects Using a Rolling Cross-Section Design

Jasper van de Pol
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Abstract

The rolling cross-section (RCS) is a relatively new and promising technique to study campaign dynamics. As there are some important similarities between RCS data and the data registered by voting advice applications (VAAs), it is interesting to investigate the possibilities of applying RCS methods on VAA data, something that has never been done before. In this paper, Dutch VAA data are used to study how televised debates of party leaders affect evaluations of these leaders by focusing on two left-wing parties, and how these evaluations affect party support during the campaign for the 2012 Dutch legislative elections. Results show that the ratings of social-democrat party leader Diederik Samsom are boosted by his performance in the television debates, and that these increasingly positive evaluations have a positive influence on support for his party. No effects of the performance of socialist party leader Emile Roemer have been found; however, a strong relation between his evaluation and support for the SP could be established. The results are discussed in light of the advantages and disadvantages of non-probability VAA datasets. A weighting technique is applied to control for selection effects. The findings should be taken with caution, as conclusions could not be generalized to the Dutch population. However, VAA data do allow examining causal effects, which introduces great potential for future research.

Introduction

The dynamics of parliamentary elections have with no doubt transformed in such a way that political leaders are most often in the center of attention (Wattenberg, 1991), instead of their party platform and ideology, in what Poguntke and Webb (2005) have defined as ‘presidentialization of politics’. Regardless of formal constitutional arrangements, the personal appeal of political leaders plays an ever-increasing role in a development that has been related to the general transformation of previously mass-based parties, characterized as political personalization (McAllister, 2007; Garzia, 2011). As traditional sociopolitical cleavages are declining in the advanced democracies of Europe and North America (Franklin et al., 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000) party choices appear to be increasingly individualized, which implicates “a shift away from a style of electoral decision-making based on social group and/or party cues toward a more individualized and inwardly oriented style of political choice” (Dalton, 1996: 346). Mair et al. (2004) attribute the transformation of the electoral strategies, particularly of social democratic parties, which typically focused on certain socioeconomic divisions in the past, to this development. Such a possible outcome was already recognized by seminal scholars such as Otto Kirchheimer, who affirmed that “the mass integration party, product of an age with harder class lines and more sharply protruding denominational structures, is transforming itself into a catch-all ‘people’s’ party” (Kirchheimer, 1966: 185). Features of these trends of party and competition transformation include de-ideologization, policy platform flexibility, and basing campaigns on features more appealing to voters such as leadership (Farrell and Webb, 2000; Gunther and Diamond, 2003; Krouwel 2012). Simultaneously, the nature of political communication has shifted to include new electronic media channels, which play an important role especially in national elections

campaigns (Bowler and Farrell, 1992; Glaser and Salmon, 1991). This shift has been crucial for transferring the attention focus to party leaders, instead of parties themselves, with the latter being “more dependent in their communications with voters on the essentially visual and personality-based medium of television” (Mughan, 2000: 129). Contemporary televised campaigns often center their attention on the personal qualities of political contenders, instead of focusing on programmatic and ideological content, shifting the electoral competition to a duel between personalities rather than parties (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007). If democratic politics have indeed become overwhelmingly candidate-centered, one might consider that “leaders’ personalities and personal characteristics may...play a large part in determining how individuals vote in democratic elections” (King, 2002: 4).

Within political communication research, it is still a debated issue to what extent election campaigns really matter for the outcome of elections. Most scientists agree that voters are influenced by campaigns, but it is hard to accurately determine the effect of specific campaign events. Wlezien (2010) discusses the two main problems: first, campaign events only have small effects, and second, most research techniques do not have enough power to detect those minor influences. A large opinion poll (N = 1000) with surveys at short intervals is needed to detect effects as large as five percentage points in party preference, for example, while most effects are smaller. Accordingly, Iyengar & Simon (2000) argue that influences of campaigns can be observed more clearly and accurately if researchers a) shift their focus to more indirect influences like priming, and b) start using other research methods than cross-sectional surveys. They argue rolling cross-sectional designs (RCS) are the most promising survey design in capturing campaign effects. The RCS is a day-to-day cross-section of the electorate during the course of the campaign. Compared to other techniques, such as cross-sectional time series or a panel design, it is a relatively cost-efficient technique to obtain

many observations at short time intervals. In addition, it does not suffer from disadvantages like panel attrition, conditioning effects of repeatedly asking the same question to the same respondent, or time heterogeneity because not all respondents respond on the same day (Johnston & Brady, 2002; Romer, Kenski, Winneg, Adasiewicz, & Jamieson, 2006).

This paper explores the possibilities of using the information recorded by Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) as a rolling cross-section to study campaign effects. VAAs are increasingly popular websites where voters can obtain personalized voting ‘advices’ after filling out their opinion towards a selection of statements. In the build-up to elections, ten thousands of people visit such websites daily in many European countries (Garzia & Marschall, 2012). Like the RCS, the data recorded by VAAs consists of large samples of the electorate with different respondents opting in every day. They fill out a set of questions regarding political opinions, as well as leadership evaluations and party preferences. This kind of data should therefore be suitable for analysing campaign effects using the same methods typically applied on RCS data. VAA data has never been used for this purpose previously, despite its great potential. Especially political science and communication science could profit greatly from using this kind of data in studying campaign effects.

We utilize data collected by the Dutch VAA *Kieskompas* to study its potential in a RCS research design. *Kieskompas* is the second most popular VAA in the Netherlands, with more than 757,000 users completing the test during the 2012 legislative election campaign. In this paper, the dynamics of this recent campaign are analysed. The relatively short campaign was characterised by large swings of party support in the polls. In particular, the polls showed a major fall of the socialist party (SP) and a major rise of the social-democrat labour party (PvdA) shortly before Election Day. These dynamics were attributed by many to the good

performance of PvdA leader Diederik Samsom in important TV debates, and the bad performance of SP leader Emile Roemer in the same debates (see for example De Vries, 2012). This leads to the following research question:

Are voter's evaluations of PvdA-leader Samsom and SP-leader Roemer affected by television debates, and can vote intention for either PvdA or SP on be explained by these evaluations of political leaders?

Similar effects of media performance by leaders on party choice have been found previously using both cross-sectional data (e.g., Druckman & Parkin, 2005) as well as panel data (e.g., Garzia, 2012).

Theory

We can roughly distinguish five reasons that leads citizens to vote for a certain party: identification with a specific group; performance of the incumbent government (e.g. unemployment rate); specific issues a party stands for; strategic motives (to get a specific party in government or to keep a specific party out); and the appeal of party leaders (Oegema and Kleinnijenhuis, 2000). In political science, there are different perspectives on the relative importance of these factors and the role of party leader evaluations in the final party choice. An important school of thought adheres to the “funnel model” introduced by Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960) which, in short, assumes that political socialization (which depends on socioeconomic factors) and the resulting ideology and party identification,

precede and influence other factors that have an effect on one's party choice, such as party leader evaluations. The performance of party leaders therefore should have a relatively small impact on the election outcome (Bartle & Crewe, 2002). However, others (e.g. Garzia, 2012; Hayes & McAllister, 1997) argue that due to the recent trend of personalization of politics, this funnel model is not accurate anymore. One could not assume that ideology is a fixed, exogenous variable and that leader preference is a result of it. It might as well be the other way around: people report an ideology or identification with a party *because of* the party leader they favor. This implies that leader evaluations might play a crucial role in election outcomes. Contrary to this anticipation, there is no established consensus in the literature when it comes to how the personal appeal of a political leader affects individual's party choice. Voluminous research has presented empirical evidence in support of the personalization hypothesis (Bean and Mughan, 1989; Clarke et al., 2004; Lobo, 2006; Garzia, 2013), while others have found that leadership effect varies (King, 2002; Curtice and Holmberg, 2005; Karvonen, 2010).

This raises the question as to what leader evaluations are based on. Since most voters only know party leaders through the media, the way they are presented in it is likely to influence voter's opinion. Oegema and Kleinnijenhuis (2000) mention competence and sympathy as the two main features Dutch voters base their evaluations on. The most important theory of media impact on citizens' evaluations of party leaders is priming (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990; Scheufele, 2000). According to priming theory, media do not influence individuals' attitudes directly, but rather determine the criteria by which those individuals eventually judge politicians. The more attention media pay to a particular issue – a certain action or characteristic of the politician – the more central this issue becomes in the overall evaluation of that politician. For example, the performance of the Dutch Socialist Party leader Roemer in

television debates during the 2012 campaign was described by many media sources as ‘disappointing’. Citizens who consume more news would, according to priming theory, therefore become more negative in their evaluation of Roemer. Contrarily, main media outlets generally positively evaluated the performance of Dutch Labour leader Samsom, thus potentially boosting voter’s perception of the PvdA frontrunner.

We expect to reveal an effect of the television debates on party leader evaluations on the one hand, and an effect of party leader evaluations and party support on the other.

Data and Measurement

In this study we use an opt-in, non-probability sample, collected through the online Vote Advice Application *Kieskompas*. VAAs are online applications that enable prospective voters to compare their own policy preferences with the stated policy positions of candidates or parties running in the election. Due to the ‘instant reward’ of a personalised voting advice, VAAs allow us to ask respondents a wide range of policy positions and a larger number of background items (such as leadership evaluations and vote propensities) than traditional election surveys. During the campaign for the 2012 Dutch legislative elections, VAA *Kieskompas* was online for 29 days, from August 15 to Election Day, September 12, 2012. During this time *Kieskompas* was consulted more than 1.2 million times, with 757,052 users fully completing the questionnaire. For every visit, a log file was recorded containing the answers user gave to all questions and statements, and metadata such as the time of arrival at the website and the time it took the user to answer all questions. On the initial page of the VAA, users were asked to fill out their age, sex, and highest level of education, which was done by 74.6% of them. Before receiving their personalized advice, users were asked to give

their propensity to vote for each party on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (would never vote for party) to 10 (would most likely vote for party; see Van der Eijk, Van der Brug, Kroh, & Franklin, 2006). The response rate was 61.1%. Furthermore, next to an empathy evaluation, users were also asked to rate the extent to which party leaders are “capable of being a Prime Minister” on similar 11-point scale ranging from 0 (not capable at all) to 10 (very capable; response rate of 65.7%).

In order to obtain a selection of users who filled out the VAA seriously, responses of users who finished within one minute, who reported the same opinion towards all statements, and who were younger than 18 years (thus not eligible to vote) were omitted. Because observations with missing values to any of the relevant variables were deleted list-wise, the final sample consists of 455,249 observations (60.1% of the *Kieskompas* users who completed the test). It is important to note that this sample is not representative for the Dutch electorate. Men are overrepresented (59.2% is male) and so are the highly educated (59.4% have attended either college or university). Based on the relatively high educational level of *Kieskompas* users, we assume that there is also an overrepresentation of politically interested citizens.

The resulting data was analyzed as if it were rolling cross-section data. In short, in a rolling cross-section, every day a cross-section of the population is interviewed, which allows for very close monitoring of campaign dynamics. Traditionally, campaign effects, such as the influence of important events like TV-debates between candidates, have often been studied using (pooled) cross-sectional time series designs with measurement points (or waves) before and after the event (Iyengar & Simon, 2000). The influence of the event on the dependent variable (e.g. party choice) was measured by comparing the two measurement moments.

A STUDY OF CAMPAIGN EFFECTS USING A ROLLING CROSS-SECTION DESIGN

There are two important disadvantages of this approach, however. First, this can only be done to study the effect of expected events, since the research design should anticipate on the timing of the event. A RCS makes it possible to more accurately detect changes in trends and could, for example, show more precisely when a change in the trend occurs, while on the basis of cross-sectional time series designs a change would be assigned to important events between measurement points (Brady & Johnston, 2006). Second, not all respondents can be reached and interviewed on the same day, so one measurement point actually entails several days (Johnston & Brady, 2002; Romer et al., 2006). This means that additional heterogeneity over time is captured in measuring campaign effects and party preferences. In other words, those interviewed later differ from those interviewed earlier, both in individual characteristics (interest in politics, occupation, etcetera) and context (campaign effects may affect opinions during the interview; Johnston & Brady, 2002). The rolling cross-section turns this problem into a virtue: if each day a new sample is ‘released’ to the interviewers, over the course of a campaign there are no systematic differences between people who are interviewed on different days. Late responders belonging to an earlier sample are interviewed on the same day as early responders in a later sample, making the selection of people being interviewed on a certain day effectively random (Johnston & Brady, 2002).

RCS also have advantages over panel surveys as larger samples can be obtained (this is too expensive for a panel), that do not suffer from panel attrition (resulting in less representative samples) or subject fatigue (respondents getting bored from answering the same question every time). Because of these reasons, a panel can also not be interviewed each single day (Romer et al., 2006).

As discussed above, VAA data share some important characteristics with RCS data and might therefore likewise be a superior source of information for some research designs, especially when large samples are needed in testing effects over time during election campaigns. Probably the most important differences between VAA data and RCS data as described by Johnston and Brady (2002) are that a) VAA data are not as representative of the electorate as RCS samples (men and higher educated people are often overrepresented – Hirzalla, van Zoonen, & de Ridder, 2010; Hooghe & Teepe, 2007) and b) the moment at which one visits the VAA website might not be as random as the timing of being interviewed in the RCS design. Previous research found that in the beginning of the campaign, more politically interested people will fill out the VAA because they are the first to know that the application is available, and in the last few days before election day there will be more indecisive voters who are in need of an advice (Van de Pol, Holleman, Kamoen, Krouwel & De Vreese, 2014). Characteristics of these different types of users, and therefore also the opinions and preferences they report, might be different, which would result in a bias.

To resolve these issues we weighted the data in two ways: First, we weighted the daily averages of all party and leader ratings on the characteristics age, sex and education, to make sure the distribution of age, sex and education is kept constant across time. As a result, the composition of respondents is similar for each day, and campaign dynamics in our results cannot be attributed to differences in respondents per day. Second, we weighted the complete dataset to match population parameters to make sure the weighted sample is representative for the Dutch population on age, sex and education.

Analyses

A STUDY OF CAMPAIGN EFFECTS USING A ROLLING CROSS-SECTION DESIGN

To study the suitability of VAA data for capturing campaign dynamics and to answer our research question on the effects of TV debates on party leader evaluation and of party leader evaluations on party preferences, we proceed as follows. First, the campaign dynamics as captured by the VAA data are compared to traditional public opinion polls and other accounts of the 2012 national election campaign. In the second part of our analysis section, we analyse the relation between campaign effects like important TV debates and changes in party leader ratings.

Dynamics in the Dutch 2012 election campaign

The campaign for the 2012 Dutch legislative elections was marked by a very large swing in vote intentions between the SP and the PvdA. Both parties competed for the vote of left-wing voters, and at the start of the campaign the SP triumphed in the polls. However, as Election Day approached, many voters switched their vote intention to the PvdA, hoping this party would become large enough to defeat the incumbent right-wing VVD. Figure 1 shows an overview of the polls during the last weeks of the campaign. The steep fall of the SP and the sharp rise of the PvdA are clearly visible between 28 August and 8 September. The popularity of other parties was relatively stable.

A STUDY OF CAMPAIGN EFFECTS USING A ROLLING CROSS-SECTION DESIGN

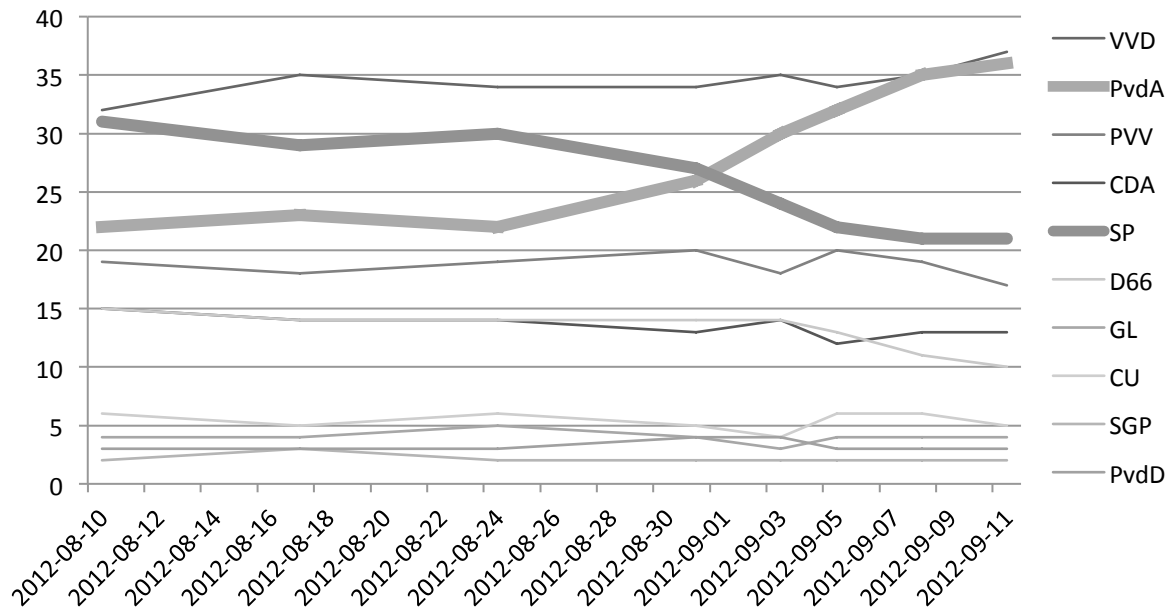


Figure 1. Election polls (seats per party) for the final weeks of the 2012 election campaign.

Source: Ipsos Synovate

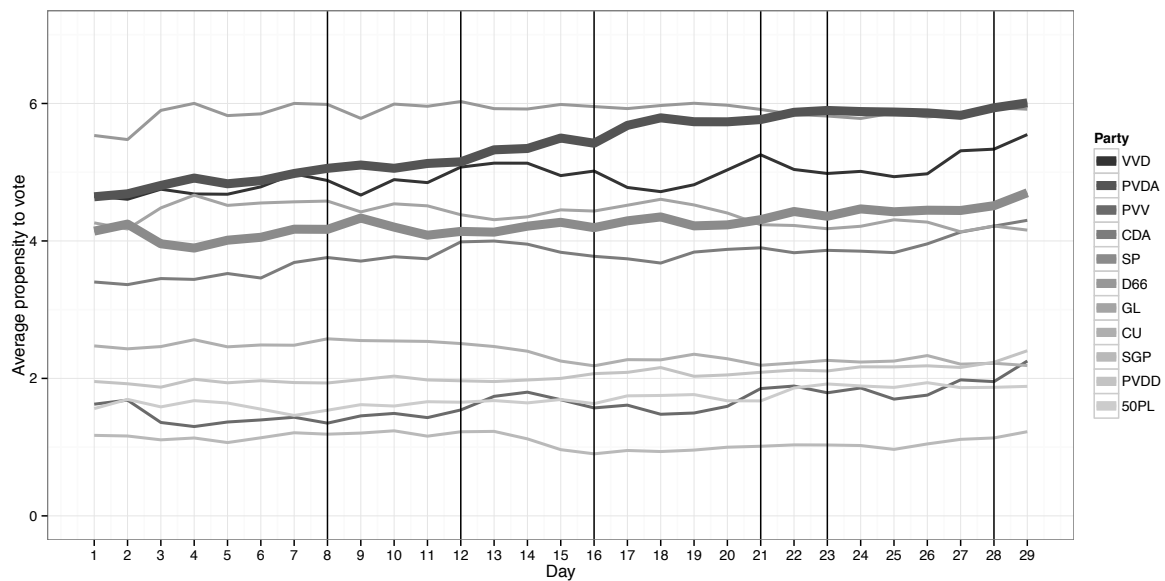


Figure 2 shows the parties preferred by users of the Kieskompas VAA in the same period of time. The figure shows similar dynamics: the popularity of PvdA (black thick line) increases dramatically during the campaign while other parties relatively stable. The order of parties in

popularity is similar but not exactly the same, as Kieskompas is mostly used by left-wing people (this bias does not disappear when weighting on age, sex and education). The vertical lines indicate TV debates; on August 26 (the 12th day of Kieskompas being online) the crucial “RTL Premiersdebat” took place, in which PvdA leader Samsom outperformed SP leader Roemer, according to commentators. After this moment the discourse in the strategic news coverage changed in favor of the leader of the PvdA (see Nieuwsmonitor, 2012). The steepest increase in propensity to vote PvdA is visible after the 12th day in the campaign. The average propensity to vote for SP does not decrease; this relates to the propensity-of-vote measure being

Figure 3 shows that a similar dynamic is visible among VAA users in terms of leader ratings. This figure shows day by day how Kieskompas users evaluate all party leaders on their capability to be prime minister. Again, the thick black line identifies the ratings of the social democrats, and specifically their leader Samsom, and the thick grey line indicates the ratings of Socialist Party leader Roemer.

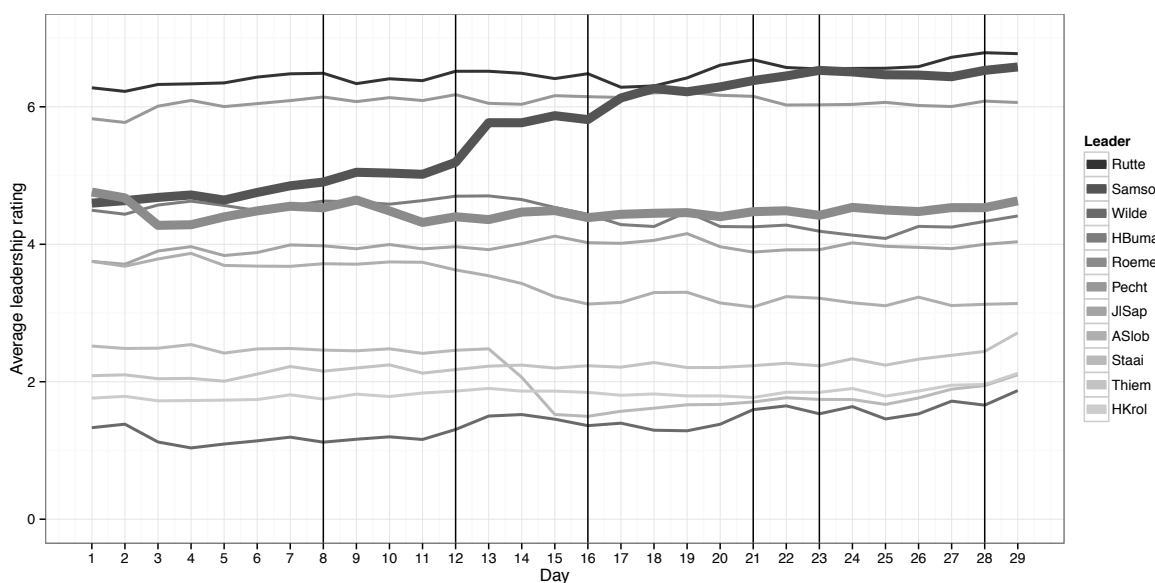


Figure 3. Capability ratings of party leaders during the election campaign.

Figure 3 shows that the ratings of most party leaders remained relatively stable throughout the campaign, with one important exception: the evaluation of the leader of PvdA-leader Samsom increases sharply after the first TV debates and continues to rise until Election Day. This increase in popularity is in line with other analyses of the 2012 election campaign (Nieuwsmonitor, 2012), confirming that VAA data is capable of identifying the same dynamics, only with a much greater precision regarding the exact timing of mass preference changes.

Another smaller change in Figure 3 can be seen in the evaluations of party leader Van der Staaij (of the Christian right-wing SGP), whose rating suddenly plummeted after a controversial remark he made on the likelihood of women who were raped to get pregnant.

Effects of leadership rating on party preferences

Johnston and Brady (2006; 2002) argue that in order to draw causal conclusions about campaign effects, a statistical test of the association between predictors and vote preference should be complemented with a figure showing the trend of the values. This figure is helpful in determining the causal order of events. Below, we included figures for both PvdA (figure 5a) and SP (figure 5b) showing the trend in capability ratings of the party leaders and party support. The days count from the first day that *Kieskompas* was available (August 15) until the 29th day, which was Election Day (September 12). The red lines in the figures represent the party leader evaluation (on a scale from 0 to 10) and the blue lines the average propensity to vote for the party. The vertical lines indicate the television debates during the campaign, which were claimed by many to be crucial moments in the campaign. In national opinion

polls, Samsom was declared to be winner and Roemer loser of the “Premiersdebat” on August 26 (the 12th day). According to the polls, Samsom also won the “KnvB Lijsttrekkersdebat” (the 16th day), as well as the “RTL Lijsttrekkersdebat” (the 21st day).

The rating of Samsom increased considerably during the campaign. Before the first debate (which received less attention than later debates) a small increase was already visible, but the large shift begins only after this debate, and before the first “crucial” ‘Premiersdebat’. The capability rating of Samsom increases from an average of 5 to 6.5 between the 9th and the 23rd day, between which the most important debates took place. We can argue with respect to figure 4a that the TV-debates did not *evoke* a rise in the capability ratings of Samsom, since the rating was increasing already before the debates started and there was no important change in the trend right after a particular debate. Rather, it seems that the increasing appreciation of Samsom was *accelerated* by the debates. Another observation that could be made is that the change in the ratings of Samsom seem to precede the increase in popularity for the PvdA, which was quite flat until some days after the steep increase in Samsom’s popularity.

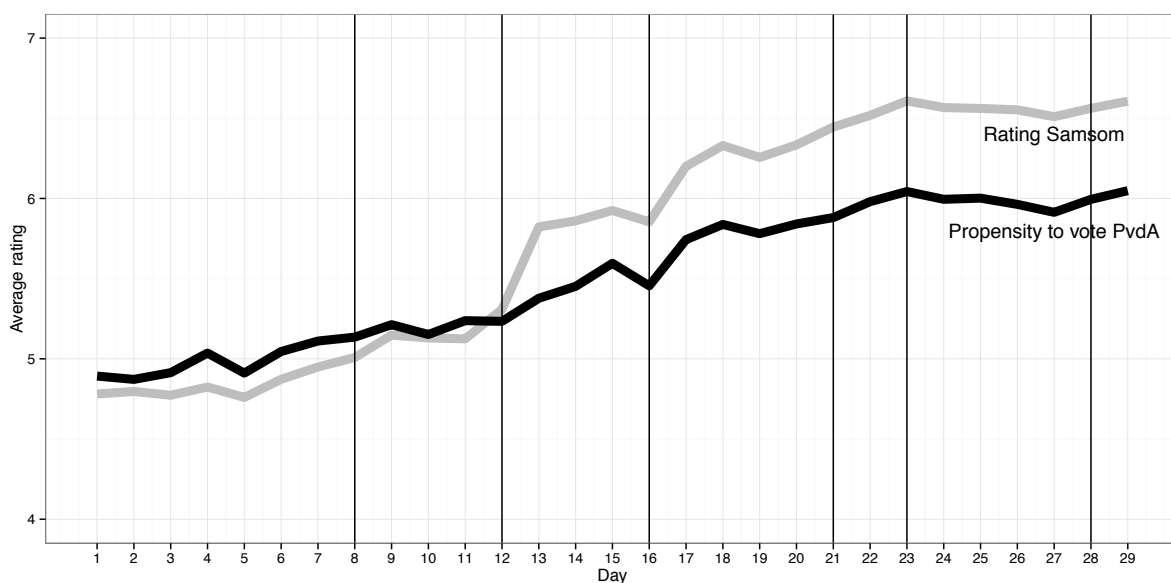


Figure 4a. Capability rating of Samsom and support for the PvdA.

In contrast to this, the ratings of Roemer were very stable, as can be seen in Figure 4b. After the first debate, the daily average shows a small peak followed by a small dip after, but Roemer did not participate in this debate so there could not be an effect of his debate performance here. On the very last day (which is Election day) there seems to be a small increase.

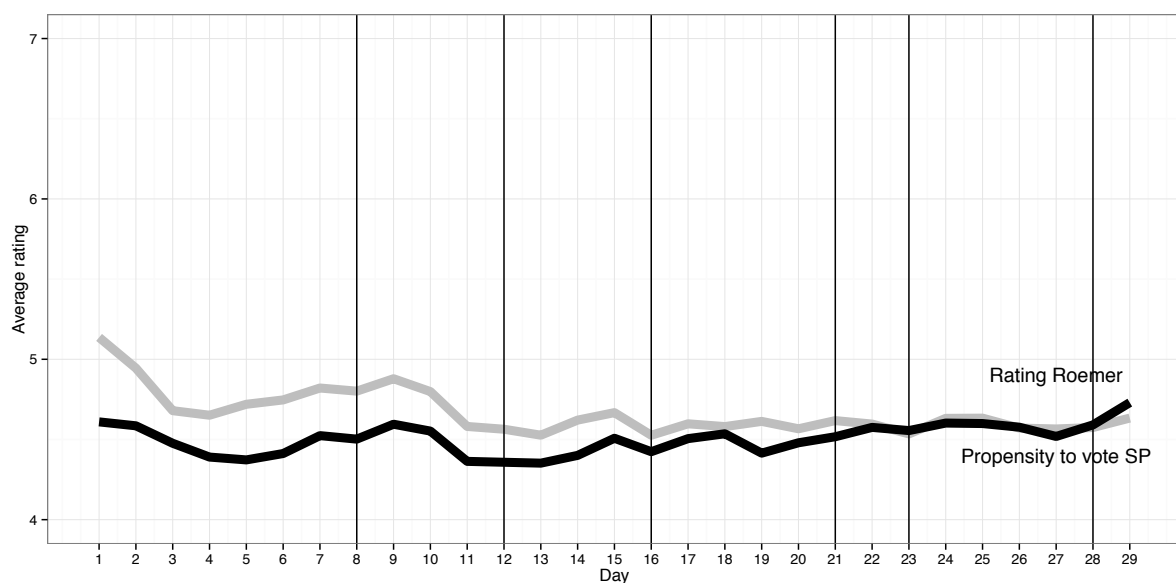


Figure 4b. Capability rating of Roemer and support for the SP

In general, the figures show a strong relation between the capability rating of the party leader and the support for the party. The figures do not seem to give the impression that there is any effect of Roemer's evaluation on the support for the PvdA, or vice versa. In the next sections, we will analyse the relation between leadership rating and party preference in detail.

Relation with issue agreement

As mentioned above, the most interesting dynamic in the campaign was the switch in popularity between the SP and the PvdA, which seems to be a direct result from the leader's performance and the media coverage of the campaign. To illustrate this, figure 5 shows the relation between issue agreement, party leader capability evaluation, and party support.

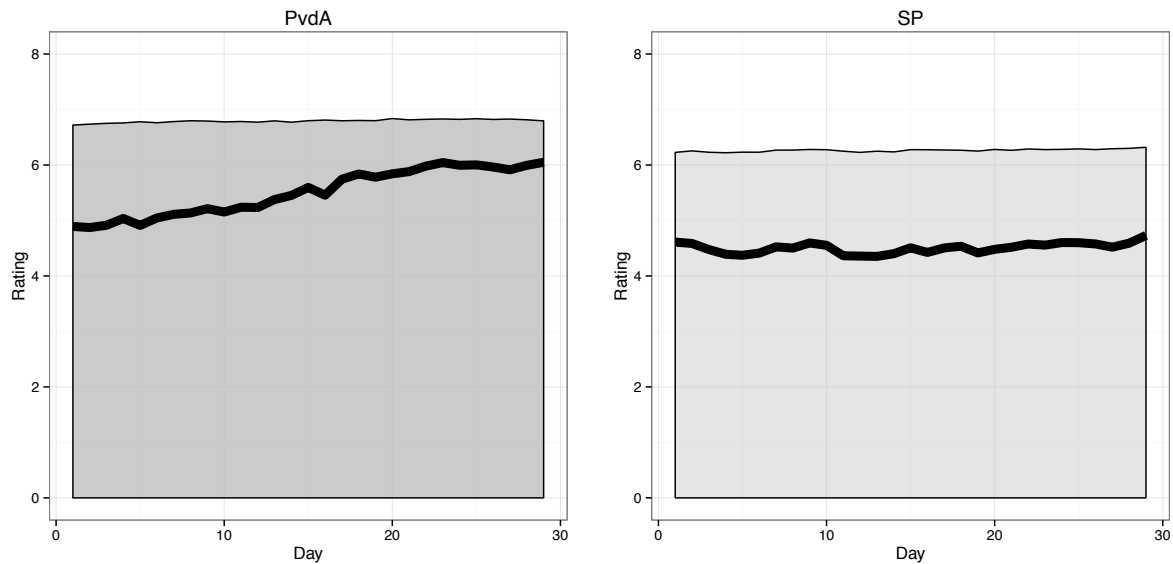


Figure 6. Relation between the propensity to vote for the party (line) and issue agreement (area), for PvdA and SP.

There is hardly any relation between dynamics in agreement with parties on issues, and the party support; especially when it concerns the PvdA (left panel of figure 5). There might be a small increase in agreement but this does not seem to be related to the sharp increase in party support; neither with the PvdA nor with the SP.

Conditional change model

To test the relationship between leader evaluation and party preference, a conditional change model is applied to the VAA data. Application of this model to RCS data is described by Johnston and Brady (2002). The likelihood to vote is predicted by evaluation of the leader at

the time of filling out the questionnaire, controlled for the pre-campaign likelihood to vote, in order to capture the campaign effect¹. This pre-campaign baseline is (obviously) not measured by the VAA. However, it can be estimated by including the normalized values of leader ratings, which is the rating reported by an individual on a certain day, minus the mean rating of all individuals on that day (see Johnston & Brady, 2002; and Johnston, 2008, for an extensive discussion of this procedure). This procedure is based on the assumption that the change in leader evaluation is the same across all people. This is a rather strong but necessary assumption, as a real baseline measurement is lacking.

Table 1 shows the effect of capability ratings for Samsom (model 1) and Samsom and Roemer (model 2) on the preference for the social-democratic PvdA, controlled for the pre-campaign baseline preference (cross-sectional variance kept constant). Similarly, table 2 shows the impact of capability ratings for Roemer (model 3) and Roemer and Samsom (model 4) on the preference for the socialist SP, keeping cross-sectional variance constant.

¹ If this baseline voting likelihood is not controlled for, longitudinal effects would be confounded by cross-sectional effects because of the correlation between the leader evaluation at the time of interview and the omitted leader evaluation at $t = 0$. In other words, the cross-sectional variance should be separated from temporal variance.

Table 1. *OLS regression of voting preference for PvdA*

	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>b</i>	s.e.
Capability rating Samsom	0.6228	(0.0062)***	0.6344	(0.0062)***
Baseline rating Samsom	0.1631	(0.0066)***	0.0976	(0.0066)***
Age	-0.0014	(0.0003)***	-0.0015	(0.0003)***
Female	0.3280	(0.0089)***	0.2918	(0.0089)***
Education	-0.0023	(0.0005)***	-0.0037	(0.0005)***
Capability rating Roemer			0.0007	(0.0430)
Baseline rating Roemer			0.1396	(0.0431)**
Intercept	1.8208	(0.0401)***	1.7575	(0.2007)***
R^2	0.40		0.41	
N	306,070		300,104	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Model 1 in table 1 shows a strong positive effect of Samsom's capability rating on support for the PvdA. On an 11-point scale, an increase of one point in the rating of Samsom is equal to an increase of 0.62 point in the likelihood to vote PvdA, controlled for cross-sectional variance, age, sex and education. Explained variance is high as well: $R^2 = 40\%$. In model 2, the rating of the capability of Roemer to be prime minister is added (controlled for the baseline), but this coefficient is not significant, neither does it affect the impact of Samsom's rating. The explained variance is increased by one per cent, which is due to the inclusion of an additional variable - the baseline rating for Roemer.

Table 2. *OLS regression of voting preference for SP*

	Model 3		Model 4	
	<i>b</i>	s.e.	<i>b</i>	s.e.
Capability rating Roemer	0.7867	(0.0434)***	0.8755	(0.0436)***
Baseline rating Roemer	0.0170	(0.0435)	-0.1048	(0.0436)*
Age	-0.0007	(0.0003)*	0.0009	(0.0003)**
Female	0.3434	(0.0092)***	0.3214	(0.0093)***
Education	0.0034	(0.0005)***	0.0042	(0.0005)***
Capability rating Samsom			0.1992	(0.0063)***
Baseline rating Samsom			-0.0734	(0.0067)***
Intercept	0.7176	(0.1970)***	-0.9314	(0.2039)***
R^2	0.46		0.47	
<i>N</i>	305,774		299,257	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Model 3 in table 2 shows the effect of the rating of Roemer's capability to be prime minister on support for the SP, controlled for the baseline and for age, sex and education. The impact of Roemer's rating on support for the SP is even higher than the impact of Samsom's rating on support for the PvdA: with an increase in Roemer's rating of one point, the likelihood of voting SP is increased by 0.79 points. R^2 is also higher: 46% of the variance in party support is explained by model 3. In model 4, the impact of Samsom's rating (controlled for the baseline) is included. Surprisingly, Samsom's rating has a positive impact: an increase in Samsom's rating of one point is equal to an increase voting SP of 0.20 point.

Conclusions

Figure 5a suggests that a positive trend in the popularity of Samsom is at least boosted by his performance in TV-debates: between the first and the last debate, his average rating increases with almost 14 percentage points. On the other hand, the performance of SP leader Roemer, which was negatively evaluated in the media, seems to not have affected his capability ratings during the campaign. The TV-debates clearly have no influence on the socialist leader.

There is a strong relation between the capability ratings of both politicians and the likelihood of voting for their parties. In addition, there is a (weaker) relation between the rating for Samsom and the likelihood of voting SP. In order to draw conclusions about causality, however, we need to take figures 4a and 4b into account as well. Figure 5a shows clearly that the rise in support for the PvdA is preceded by an increase in the rating of Samsom, at least from the 9th day on. This points at a causal influence of the evaluations of Samsom on the support for the PvdA. The picture is different for SP however; there is a strong correlation between the capability ratings for Roemer and the support for the SP, but since there is no substantial change in the trend of either parameter, one cannot judge whether one influences the other or vice versa. It is also not possible to draw causal conclusions about the influence of Samsom's ratings on the support for the SP. Interestingly, the results in Figure 5 show no clear relationship between agreement with the policy preferences of the two parties and increasing support for them.

Discussion

This paper has made clear that, first, there are many advantages to RCS methods over other methods to study campaign effects, and second, VAA data offers great research opportunities when RCS methods are applied to them. The data are superior to cross-sectional data and two-wave cross-sectional time series data when it comes to (precisely) identifying causes and effects, and they trump panel data when it comes to the possible amount of measurement points and the possible number of observations. For example, with such a large number of observations the graphical estimations of trends in leader evaluations and party support will

be more precise, as it “smoothens out” the noise due to measurement error (Brady & Johnston, 2006). The large sample size also results in more powerful statistical tests, but those do not necessarily require such a large sample.

There are, however, also some drawbacks to the usage of VAA data for this purpose, compared to “regular” rolling cross-sectional data, as described by Johnston and Brady (2006; 2002; 2008). An important disadvantage is that there is a limit to the number of items that can be included in VAAs. People visit such applications to receive a voting advice, and do not want to be burdened by many questions that are irrelevant to the eventual advice.

Consequently, this reduces the possible applications of such data. In this paper, for example, it was not possible to control for other explanations of party choice and for spurious effects.

A second important disadvantage, as mentioned before, is that the sample captured by VAAs is not representative of most populations of interest (often the electorate). The selection of people visiting *Kieskompas* is biased towards higher educated, politically interested citizens compared to those visiting the most popular Dutch VAA, *Stemwijzer*. However, using weighting techniques we were able to give groups that are underrepresented among *Kieskompas* users more weight as to make the sample representative on age, sex and education.

Related to this is the fact that the timing of visits to *Kieskompas* are probably not completely random, which is necessary if one wants to assume that differences over time would completely be due to factors “associated with the passage of time” (Johnston, 2008) like campaign events. It is not inconceivable that there is some selection in the timing of visits. For example, the news of the launch of a VAA will reach an audience of mainly politically interested citizens, so they will probably be the main visitors on the first days the VAA is

online. In the last days before Election Day, much more people will know of the tool and perhaps relatively more indecisive people use it to really find out which party to vote for. A possible consequence could be that campaign effects are overestimated in the last part of the campaign, because people who have not yet decided about their vote are more susceptible to election campaign effects (Fournier, Nadeau, Blais, Gidengil, & Nevitte, 2004). However, this problem could also be overcome by weighting: based on age, education, sex and vote certainty weights were calculated and employed to make sure the composition of respondents is constant across days and campaign dynamics found in our sample could not be attributed to changes in this composition.

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